Leadership Reflection

Joseph B. Bustillos

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Observations

"We know that all things work together for good ..." Romans 8.28

The first thought that comes to mind when I reflect and think back over this last term's study on leadership was my consistent tendency to examine dysfunctional examples of leadership such as Steve Jobs or the clip that I showed from the film, "Glengarry GlenRoss." I know that on one level it's simpler to examine bad examples than to put together a cogent positive understanding of what leadership really is. I thought about this a lot when I was taking Dr. Spark's Mentoring class during my OMAET program and came to the conclusion that I just hadn't had many positive mentoring experiences. I can now see how that influences my approach to analyzing what good leadership means (Bustillos, 2002)

Over the course of my adult working career, working 15-years for a public utility, working nine-years in education, working while attending college and high school at supermarkets, restaurants and "housekeeping," I've watched the relationships between bosses and subordinates. I guess the thing that still amazes me, especially in education, is how some people look at bosses or leaders as somehow being more "special," that there must be something "better" about such a person that would enable them to be the leader or boss or whatever title is bestowed upon the one in front. And it may be my less than positive personal history understanding leadership, but I've long held that being in an administrative or boss role is not about hierarchical structures of importance but is largely a social necessity that someone or some group has to do that task of managing or leading,

which is equivalent in importance to all the other tasks that need to be done for the job or enterprise to succeed.

What it comes down to, for me, is that every member of the team, every person who is a part of getting the job done, deserves the same level of respect and consideration whether they're the ones with their names on the door or the ones who polish and clean the door. Dr. Vance Caesar shared a story during his leadership session this past summer from his youth about a time when he tried to get the secret of success from the father of a friend and mostly succeeded in irritating the father because he was unable to appreciate the advice this man was giving him. The man told Caesar that the secret to his success was the relationships he had built over the years. In the leadership teams I've been a part of I've noted that the relationships Caesar is referring to are not just the ones that one can obviously benefit from with those above ones position, but from everyone one works with. On a school site it isn't just the principal or the building leader but how one interacts and works with the other teachers, the substitutes, the janitors, the parent volunteers, ones students, the office staff (and never go against the school secretary, there's no one on campus who can make one's life wonderful or horrible more quickly than the school secretary).

Labels

So when I look at the various attempts to create a universal definition of what leadership is I have to begin with a belief that it is a function of the group, that leadership is like language and culture, it is an outgrowth of humans trying to survive or get a job done. It is a function that someone or some group must assume. The traits: intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability, discussed by Northouse (2004,

p. 19), whether understood as innate traits or learned skills, are advantageous capabilities

for those "in charge" to have and use. But in the end, one can be the most talented drone

in the cube-farm, but unless one is part of the group and the group recognizes those

talents one is not a leader, just a very talented drone. If I were to put a label on all of this,

I guess "Leader-Member Exchange Theory" (LMX) would be the closest (Northouse

2004, p. 147).

That's the pragmatic understanding of leadership, LMX, but upon further

reflection Transformation Leadership (Northouse, 2004, p. 169) appeals to me because it

speaks of the dynamic between the leader and the group on a different directional level. It

is more than just an "understanding" between leader and group but a connection between

both leader and group that changes both parties over the course of seeing their vision into

fruition. Understandably, this sort of relationship is not the norm and may well be quite

beyond the scope of most leader/group requirements. How many Martin Luther King,

Jrs., and Ghandis have there been in history?

<center>Strengths</center>

Listening-

As a child I observed that my folks were understandably not fond of the stereotype

about Mexicans being loud blowhards. More to the point, I learned that they were not

particularly impressed with anyone who came into a gathering and with little regard for

existing discussions, announced their arrival and commenced to attempt to dominate the

conversation. So I learned to observe the "lay of the land" and wait for admittance into

the group before opening my mouth. I learned to observe and to listen.

As for this being a leadership skill or trait, I'm sure that we've all had to endured persons who have inflicted us with their direction or "leadership" all the while knowing that they have no clue about what is going on and aren't the slightest bit interested in finding out what is going on. Generally these "leaders" are given the special designation, "idiots," among more vulgar epithets. So, I generally check with the "locals" before I bless them with my take on the situation.

Words & Writing

My first love was doodling and drawing. But in high school I developed a love for the printed word and the nuance of language while I endeavored to make my way through the King James Version of the Bible. Funny how a new found faith motivated me to grapple with reading, which I was never fond of, much less reading an archaic narrative that was culturally and 2,000 years removed from my Southern California youth. Being exposed to such a different cadence of speech and finesse of meaning, I really began to love the beauty of words. Leadership-wise, this comes into play in my efforts to be precise and hopefully maintain some semblance of something entertaining in my written communications.

Problem-solving

I didn't start out considering myself to be a technologist but after fifteen years at the phone company I literally learned how to trouble shoot problems in my sleep. Granted, as unknowable as some people think technology might be, working with people is infinitely more complicated. And even when one hits the nail on the head, when it comes to helping someone through a problem, they simply may lack the means to understand your solution

or are more likely to just choose to ignore the whole discussion. It's never a matter of just replacing a defective circuit board.

Actually one thing that I did learn while trouble-shooting for the phone company was the importance of maintaining ones cool. I worked the evening shift and regularly had to pick up trouble tickets that the day crew couldn't fix during their shift. We were testing fiber-optic equipment just before the 1984 Olympics and I had to take over troubleshooting for a particularly brilliant technician who knew much more about electronics than I could ever hope to understand. He was testing the automatic switching system on this equip, which involved pulling a circuit board and the system was supposed to switch to a back-up. He'd been working on the problem all day and was clearly angry that it wasn't working and that he couldn't figure out why. We walked through the steps he'd taken and sure enough it wouldn't switch to the back-up when he pulled the circuit card. I thought for a moment and off the top of my head asked if he done an initiation step that we were supposed to do when this stuff is first installed (basically telling the computer, "Hello, I'm here"). His startled reaction indicated that he hadn't (the step required punching a two-digit code in a keypad after installing the circuit board) so I punched in the code, pulled out the card and it automatic did the infuriating switch. What had happened is he'd gotten so mad in the first 10-minutes of working on the problem that he couldn't think clearly for the rest of the day. He'd been staring at the same problem for the whole day, and it was a matter of a simple two-digit "hello there" code, but because he was so pissed he couldn't see the problem. Having me fix the problem in the first five-minutes of my shift probably didn't help things, but it was a pretty regular occurrence. So I learned to observe and isolate problems. As I mentioned above, working

with people problems is infinitely more complicated (the technological equivalent would

be having three or more circuit boards "go bad" at the same time), but it tends to be the

same process of carefully observing and listening and going over the steps taken.

Thinking Outside the Box/Seeing Connections

Observing, problem-solving... by the time I became the technology coordinator

and was determining how to spend my school's two-million dollars in Magnet funding to

create a video broadcasting studio, computer lab and technology-rich learning

environment I'd already spent years experimenting with technology in my own

classroom, creating student materials, using computer games like Age of Empires to draw

my students into a deeper appreciation of social studies, and training my second-language

students how to use my video camera so that they could create commercials and learn

how to interview one another. Then life took on a whole new level of complexity and I

was tasked with changing my whole school's technological environment. Actually, the

greatest difficulty of those three years wasn't getting the technology up and running. It

was getting the administrator and fellow program coordinator to understand that creating

a weekly news program didn't lend itself to dropping off 40 classes of 20 to 35 students in

the lab once a week for forty minutes, like we were running some kind of high-tech P.E.

lesson. I had to find a way to get as many students into the studio every week and yet

produce a regular news program with the students running all of the equipment, editing

all of the video and presenting their news stories. By the end of the third year I felt like I

almost had a handle on the problem. Then they cut my funding. So I moved on to another

school district and a different school. Normally thinking outside the box means finding

ways to use technology or adapting technology in ways that the authors never even

imagined, but in this case thinking outside of the box meant finding work solutions that puts myself out of a job.

Weaknesses

Delegating

Time. It's usually a case where there just isn't enough time to get something done and to train someone to do it would take even more of the time that we don't have. That's how I generally end up doing everything that has to do with technology on my school site. If it has an On-button than somehow it's my responsibility to make sure that it's running. Add to that that nine out of ten conversations begin with me walking into a room and someone saying, "Oh Joe..." and then launching into a request that I fix or look at some piece of equipment that isn't working in their room. So instead of spending the time getting the teachers (and students) better trained so that they could become more self-sufficient I end up chasing down all of the fires. I really need to work on training more "fire-fighters" instead of spending all of my time putting out the fires by myself.

Grabbing the Pulpit

I have no aversion towards standing in the front or public speaking. Students, teachers, parents, community mucky-mucks, if there is some need that requires putting myself between the cross-hairs and addressing the crowd, well then, let's do it. But I find that to be a very different thing versus meeting with my principal and pushing an idea through about why the upper grade teachers should be with their classes in the computer lab instead just dropping them off, for example. I don't have any trouble doing the talking part, but I know that I'm much more comfortable being a part of a team versus taking the reins myself. I know that if I want to move to the next level, I'm going to have to get over

it. I mean, it's not like I have a problem taking risks, I just prefer low-visibility risk-taking. But then that reduces the possibility of others learning from my example or endeavors. Damn.

How To Improve

One thing that I began to learn as I was working on my OMAET degree two-years ago was that no one really does this alone. Whether it's fostering the mentoring process or developing a leadership team of my own, I know that I need to begin to build with my strengths and fill in the gaps from there. To that end I am continuing to develop my network of friends, associates and confidantes. No one does this alone. Together we will work the good that needs to be done.

References

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